

Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918-1974



[Paul Robeson, 1898-1976](#)

By Philip S. Foner, Quartet Books, 1978

Pages 342-347

- **An Open Letter to Jackie Robinson**
- **Paul Robeson Urges Support for Jailed Leaders and Freedom Struggles in Kenya and South Africa**
- **The Real Issue in the Case of the Council on African Affairs**

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An Open Letter to Jackie Robinson*

Paul Robeson, "Here's My Story," *Freedom*, April 1953

I notice in a recent issue of "Our World" magazine that some folks think you're too outspoken. Certainly not many of our folks share that view. They think like you that the Yankees, making many a "buck" off Harlem, might have had a few of our ball players just like Brooklyn. In fact I know you've seen where a couple of real brave fellows, the Turgerson brothers, think it's about time we continued our breaking in to the Southern leagues – Arkansas and Mississippi included.

I am happy, Jackie, to have been in the fight for real democracy in sport years ago. I was proud to stand with Judge Landis in 1946 and, at his invitation, address the major league owners, demanding that the bars against Negroes in baseball be dropped. I know from my experience as a pro football player that the fans would not only take us – but like us. That's now been proven many times over.

Maybe these protests around you, Jackie, explain a lot of things about people trying to shut up those of us who speak out in many other fields.

You read in the paper every day about "doings" in Africa. These things are very important to us. A free Africa – a continent of 200 millions of folks like us and related to us – can do a lot to change things here.

In South Africa black folks are challenging Malan, a kind of super Ku Kluxer. These Africans are refusing to obey Jim Crow laws. They want some freedom like we do, and they're willing to suffer and sacrifice for it. Malan and a lot of powerful American investors would like to shut them up and lock them up.

Well, I'm very proud that these African brothers and sisters of ours play my records as they march in their parades. A good part of my time is spent in the work of the Council on African Affairs, supervised by Dr. Alphaeus Hunton, an expert on Africa and son of the great YMCA leader, the late William Hunton. Co-chairman of the Council is Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the greatest Americans who ever lived. We raise funds for Africans and bring information to Americans about the conditions in Africa – conditions to be compared with, but worse than, those in Mississippi and Alabama.

We bring the truth about Kenya, for example – about a man like Kenyatta, leader of the Kikuyu, a proud African people of centuries of culture. He's a highly educated man, with many more degrees than we have, Jackie. He's getting seven years in jail because he wants his people to be free. And there are Americans of African descent who are today on trial, fugitives, or dead (!) because they fought in their own way for their people to be free. Kenyatta's sentence calls to mind Ben Davis, Henry Winston, James Jackson, Claudia Jones, Pettis Perry and yes, Harry Moore.

What goes here, Jackie? Well, I'll tell you. The same kind of people who don't want you to point up injustices to your folks, the same people who think you ought to stay in your "place," the same people who want to shut you up – want to shut up any one of us who speaks out for our full equality, for all of our rights.

That's the heart of what I said in Paris in 1949, for example. As a matter of fact the night before I got to Paris 2,000 representatives of colored colonial peoples from all over the world (most of them students in English universities) asked me and Dr. Dadoo, leader of the Indian population in South Africa, to greet the Congress of Peace in Paris in their name.

These future leaders of their countries were from Nigeria, Gold Coast, South Africa, Kenya, Java, Indonesia, India, Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, the Philippines, Japan, Burma, and other lands. They were shapers of the future in the Eastern and colonial world and they asked us to say to this Congress representing about 800 million of the world's 2,000 million that they and their countries wanted peace, no war with anybody. They said they certainly did not want war with the Soviet Union and China because these countries had come out of conditions similar to their own. But the Soviet Union and China were now free of the so-called "free western" imperialist

powers. They were countries which had proved that colonial countries could get free, that colored peoples were as good as any other.

All these students made it clear that they felt that the nations who wanted war wanted it in order to head off struggles of colonial peoples, as in Indo-China, Malaya, Africa and Korea, for freedom. For example, if you could start a war in Africa the authorities could clamp down completely with war measures. (It's bad enough now!)

The students felt that peace was absolutely needed in order for their peoples to progress. And certainly, they said they saw no need to die for foreign firms which had come in and taken their land, rubber, cocoa, gold, diamonds, copper and other riches.

And I had to agree that it seemed to me that the same held good in these United States. There was and is no need to talk of war against any nation. We Afro-Americans need peace to continue the struggle for our full rights. And there is no need for any of our American youth to be used as cannon and bomb fodder anywhere in the world.

So I was and am for an immediate cease fire in Korea and for peace. And it seems and still seems unthinkable to me that colored or working folks anywhere would continue to rush to die for those who own most of stocks and bonds, under the guise of false patriotism.

I was born and raised in America, Jackie – on the East Coast as you were on the West. I'm a product of American institutions, as you. My father was a slave and my folks worked cotton and tobacco, and still do in Eastern North Carolina. I'll always have the right to speak out, yes, shout at the top of my voice for full freedom for my people here, in the West Indies, in Africa – and for our real allies, actual and potential, millions of poor white workers who will never be free until we are free.

And, Jackie, the success of a few of us is no final answer. It helps, but this alone can't free all of us. Your child, my grandchildren, won't be free until our millions, especially in the South, have full opportunity and full human dignity.

We fight in many ways. From my experience, I think it's got to be a militant fight. One has to square off with the enemy once in a while.

Thanks for the recognition that I am a great ex-athlete. In the recent record books the All-American team of 1918 and the nationally-picked team of 1917 have only ten players – my name is omitted.

And also thanks for the expression of your opinion that I'm certainly a great singer and actor. A lot of people in the world think so and would like to hear me. But I can't get a passport. And here in my own America millions would like to hear me. But I can't get auditoriums to sing or act in. And I'm sometimes picketed by the American Legion and other Jim Crow outfits. I have some records in the market but have difficulty getting shops to take them.

People who "beef" at those of us who speak out, Jackie, are afraid of us. Well, let them be afraid. I'm continuing to speak out, and I hope you will, too. And our folks and many others like them all over the world will make it – and soon!

Believe me, Jackie.

*[Jackie Robinson](#) was the "*first black Major League Baseball (MLB) player of the modern era*". Like Paul Robeson in American football, and Jesse Owens in athletics, Robinson broke through the colour bar to become a top athlete in his discipline, baseball.

Paul Robeson Urges Support for Jailed Leaders and Freedom Struggles in Kenya and South Africa

Statement issued by Paul Robeson, Chairman of the Council on African Affairs, New York, April 13, 1953 – Paul Robeson Archives, German Democratic Republic.

We Americans of African descent are fighting for our full rights as citizens, and must keep fighting until we achieve these rights. In this fight it will be well to remember that as American citizens we have interests and responsibilities abroad, as well as at home.

Our Government is very interested and active, and very busy, in Europe, Asia and Africa. We as black and brown people are especially interested in what our Government is doing in Asia and Africa, because Asians and Africans are Colored People like ourselves. In Africa our Government is actually supporting and doing business with the white colonialists, not the African people. It is supporting Malan in South Africa and the British in Kenya and Rhodesia.

We Colored Americans will especially want to support our African brothers and sisters in South Africa who are now being jailed by the Malan Government for peacefully resisting segregation and discrimination. We will especially want to support our African Brothers and sisters in Kenya who are being tried and imprisoned for insisting upon the return of their land.

We know that sending leaders to prison who fight for our just demands does not in any way solve our problem, but rather increases our resentment, thereby aggravating the problem. We know that trying to send to prison respected and responsible leaders like Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois and William Patterson; sending men and women like Benjamin Davis, Claudia Jones, and Jomo Kenyatta to prison; and murdering men like Harry T. Moore, will only serve to unite Americans of African descent and the African people.

Imagine all sections of our people in the United States, their organizational and programmatic differences set aside, joining together in a great and compelling action to put a STOP to Jim Crowism in all its forms everywhere in this land, and to further the struggle for land reform in the deep South. Think how such an action would stir the whole of America and the whole world. Think what support we would receive from the colored peoples and advanced white peoples of the world, - literally hundreds of millions, - strengthening in untold measure the struggle for freedom and peace.

Let us protest the jailing of the black leaders in Kenya. Let us call upon our Government this week to stop helping the Ku Kluxer Malan and help the South African people who are marching irresistibly toward freedom. Let our voices be heard in thousands of telegrams and letters to the President in Washington and to Ralph Bunche at the United Nations in New York City.

The Real Issue in the Case of the Council on African Affairs

Statement issued April 24, 1953, by Paul Robeson, Chairman, on behalf of the Council on African Affairs, concerning the Justice Department's order for that organization to register under the McCarran Act – Paul Robeson Archives, Berlin, German Democratic Republic

The consistent job of the Council on African Affairs through the years since its establishment in 1937 has been to provide accurate information on the conditions

and struggles of the peoples of Africa and to support their efforts towards total liberation. In recent months the Council has endeavoured to rally American assistance for the desperate fight of black and brown South Africans against Malan's fascist oppression, and for the Africans of Kenya whose struggle for land and survival the British seek to crush with the most ruthless and inhuman punitive measures.

For such work as this the Council, I am proud to say, has received many expressions of gratitude and appreciation from African leaders. It would appear, therefore, that in branding the Councils as "subversive" and ordering it to register under the notorious McCarran Act, U.S. authorities are at the same time branding as "subversive" all the millions of Africans who are today determined to be free of the stigma of colonialism and white supremacy domination.

This attack upon the Council represents an attempt to frighten and silence all those Americans, particularly the Negro people, who are in any way critical of U.S. policies in Africa.

Those policies are directed towards establishment of military bases in Africa without consultation with or the consent of the people in the so-called strategic areas. They aim at the extraction of the maximum quantities of uranium, manganese, copper, bauxite and scores of other African raw materials for U.S. war stock-piles and industry. They entail U.S. financial and diplomatic support for the Malan regime and for the European bosses of Africa in order to maintain the white supremacy *status quo* (as in our own Dixiecrat South) and "security" for the expanding American investments in Africa.

All this may be found explicitly or implicitly stated in numerous statements of administration leaders and in such documents as "The Overseas Territories in the Mutual Security Program" issued last year by the Mutual Security Administration. These policies and practices are a matter of official U.S. record, and not simply "Communist propaganda," as is alleged.

The Council on African Affairs opposes these policies because they are detrimental to the interests of both Africans and Americans. The Government in its charge against the Council dodges the real issue of the right of American citizens to criticize the policies of the state and poses instead a wholly false issue. Is it "subversive" not to approve of our Government's action of condoning and abetting the oppression of our brothers and sisters in Africa and other lands?

It is a matter of shame that at the recent meeting of the U.N. General Assembly it was our own country, the United States, which voted with the European colonial

powers against resolutions in the interest of the people of Africa, - resolutions which were supported by the majority of the U.N., including India and the other Asian-Middle Eastern-African member states, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union.

The real issue in our case is the right of advocacy and support for the freedom of Africa's enslaved millions, - including the descendants of Africa who have yet to achieve their full liberty and rights here in the United States.

The Council on African Affairs will continue to carry forward its work and will fight all efforts to restrict its usefulness to the cause of African freedom by means of the unconstitutional and un-American McCarran Act.

Course: African Revolutionary Writing

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